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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the time honored notion that students who successfully complete a basic course in public speaking will experience less anxiety about speech situations, and will have significantly different emotional reactions to potential public speaking situations. Scales to measure communication apprehension, speech anxiety, and pleasure, arousal, and dominance as trait emotions (personality characteristics) and as state emotions (changing emotional response) were administered to all students of all five sections of an undergraduate public speaking class at the beginning and end of the semester. Classes ranged in size from 15 to 24 students. Results showed that successful completion of the course did indeed reduce anxiety about public speaking, and that subjects' trait emotions remained constant. State emotions of pleasure were neutral and unchanged, arousal was reduced, and dominance was higher. This lends support to the notion that traits are predispositions but that cognitive change can intervene between them and state reactions; thus higher feelings of mastery and control in a public speech situation are associated with lower anxiety. (One table of data is included and 12 references are attached.) (SR)

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DECREASING COMMUNICATION ANXIETY THROUGH PUBLIC SPEECH TRAINING

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Abstract

This study investigated the time honored notion that training in public speech preparation and practice in presenting speeches will reduce anxiety about speech situations. A field experiment was conducted to determine if anxiety was reduced after successful completion of a basic course in public speaking. Changes in emotional reaction to speech situations were also examined. Results suggest that anxiety is reduced, state emotions are altered while most traits remain constant.

DECREASING COMMUNICATION ANXIETY THROUGH PUBLIC SPEECH TRAINING

Training in public speaking is a mainstay of most Speech Communication curricula. Many schools have also recognized the need to offer special training to those who have excessively high levels of anxiety about public oral communication (Hoffman and Sprague, 1982). Several authors have suggested that these treatment programs significantly alter the anxiety reaction (Neer, 1982). These claims are based more on testimony than research since there has been a lack of controlled experimentation in the area (Phillips, 1982). Even where such programs exist, the typical student is not enrolled in them but is in a basic public speaking course. Even less attention has been given to the effect that these courses have on speech anxiety. The purpose of this study is to investigate the changes that occur in reported anxiety as a result of completing a public speaking course.

Though there is little empirical support for the idea, most speech teachers believe that instruction in speech preparation skills and practice in performance will overcome most speech anxiety (Phillips, 1982). One would hope that this were true. It is possible, however, to suggest that such training makes the student more aware of the potential pitfalls inherent in the speech situation and thereby actually increases there anxiety. In a similar context, Morse and Phelps (1980) suggest that persons who have had a course in interpersonal communication actually become more anxious about interpersonal interaction. They suggest that increased knowledge of potential problems may explain the finding.

Emotion Theory

Fear about public speaking is the most commonly referenced fear of the American people (Neer, 1982). Several studies suggest that this reaction can be placed in a theoretical framework using emotion theory. Mehrabian (1980) suggests that all emotional reaction can be described with three necessary and sufficient dimensions; pleasure-displeasure, arousal-nonarousal and dominance-submissiveness. Pleasure ranges from euphoria to depression. Arousal is characterized as frenzied excitement on one extreme and comotose inactivity on the other. Dominance-submissiveness is characterized by feelings ranging from mastery to those of being controlled. The three dimensions are independent so that any value on one can simultaneously occur in combination with any value on the others. Biggers and Masterson (1984) demonstrated that anxiety about potential oral communication situations can be described as an emotional state composed of low pleasure, high arousal and low dominance.

It has also been suggested that personality can be described in terms of trait emotions (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In this conceptualization persons are said to have relatively enduring levels of pleasure, arousal and dominance. These are seen as comprising basic dimensions of temperment that influence the way a person responds emotionally to the environment.

Biggers (1986a) suggested that the differing emotional reactions of high and low Communication Apprehensive individuals to potential oral communication situations could be the result of these persons having different levels of trait emotion. Indeed, he found that high CA persons have lower trait dominance, lower trait arousal and lower arousal seeking tendency. In a separate study, it was suggested that trait emotions, specifically trait dominance, might be a better indicator of speech anxiety than more traditional measures like the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (Biggers, 1986b). It

was clear that differences in trait emotion were systematically related to differing emotional reactions to potential oral communication situations.

Students in public speech courses certainly should experience cognitive change as a result of instruction and practice. Would they also experience emotional change? Russell (1980) suggests that the two are highly interrelated so that the initial reaction of a person to any stimulus is emotional with the second reaction being cognitive and the third an emotional reaction to the cognition. All of these reactions would take place in fractions of a second and, as a package, be correlated with behavioral responses. Modification of the cognitive response would then result in a modification of the emotional reaction.

Rationale

The typical public speaking course involves instruction in and practice of accepted methods of preparation and presentation. Usually, the course is designed so that a series of progressively more difficult tasks are assigned as the students knowledge and ability increases. Central to his approach is the assumption that as experience increases anxiety will be reduced (Phillips, 1982). Therefore;

H1. Students who have successfully completed a basic course in public speaking will demonstrate significantly less anxiety about potential oral communication situations.

H2. Students who have successfully completed a course in public speaking will have significantly different emotional reaction to potential oral communication situations. Specifically, those emotional reactions that describe anxiety; low pleasure, high arousal and low

dominance, will change so that pleasure and dominance are increased and arousal is decreased.

Method

Manipulation

The public speech class that was used as the manipulation for this study is fairly typical of those offered at many universities. It is a multi-section course taught with a uniform syllabus by a group of instructors who meet periodically to assure that the experience given each student is similar. All sections use the same text with a minimum of three examinations each semester. Each student is required to give at least five speeches and one or more of these is video taped. Typically, students move from introductory to persuasive speeches as the instructor lectures on topics ranging from library research to nonverbal communication.

The course is required of some but not all students. Students enroll in any section they wish on a first come first served basis. The course is listed as a Sophomore level course but may be taken by any student. There are no prerequisites for enrollment. All instructors are full-time employees of the University and hold at least a masters degree. All sections of the course taught during the Spring semester of 1986 were used in this study. Instructors were not informed of the nature of the experiment.

Control

Since the study employed a before and after measure, maturation and changes in the environment could interfere with interpretation of the results unless a control group was used. A Small Group communication course offered

at the University in the same semester and taught by an instructor who was not teaching the public speaking course was used as the control group. Course level and student population were reasoned to be roughly equivalent. The course is also required of some students.

Materials

Communication Apprehension was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey 1977). Trait and state pleasure, arousal and dominance were measured using scales developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). Speech anxiety was measured using a scaled originally developed by Russell and Mehrabian (1974) to measure generalized anxiety and later used successfully by Biggers and Masterson (1984) to measure communication anxiety. All of these scales have demonstrated validity and reliability.

Items for the state emotion scales and the speech anxiety scale were randomly drawn and intermixed with alternate items reversed. These were presented with instructions asking the person to fill them out while thinking about giving a public speech. Items for the trait scales were randomly intermixed and alternate items reversed. Trait scales were presented with instructions that asked the subject to respond with the way they felt in general. The PRCA was presented in standard form. This packet on instruments was assembled with a cover sheet which asked about certain demographics; age, major in school, grade point average, sex, previous speaking experience, previous courses in public speaking, speech competition experience and reason for enrolling in the course.

Method

Each of the five classes in Public Speech and the one class in Small Group communication were asked to complete all measuring instruments on the first day of class. A graduate assistant who was unaware of the nature of the experiment administered the instruments, collected, scored and entered the data into the computer for analysis. No cover was used for this part of the study. Data were cleaned by examining frequencies for out of range values.

During the last week of the semester a different graduate student approached each of the same classes. During this phase the students were told that a study was being conducted of the emotion-eliciting qualities of certain prime-time television programs. A new demographic page was presented that asked about television viewing behavior. It was explained that personality characteristics might explain why some people prefer particular programs so a series of questions would be asked to measure certain key characteristics. The PRCA, state and trait emotion scales as well as anxiety about public speaking scales were again presented. Order of presentation and appearance of the scales were changed from the first administration. Fourteen weeks separated the first and second measurement. At the conclusion of this phase, subjects were debriefed and none indicated that they had perceived the intent of the experiment. Data from the second administration were entered into the computer, cleaned and merged with the earlier results.

Subjects

Subjects were undergraduates with ages from 18 to 50 and a mean of 20.2 years. Majors ranged from Business to Engineering. Most had little previous speech experience and no previous course in public speaking. Students had

enrolled either because the course was required or because they felt they would benefit from the experience. Classes ranged in size from 15 to 24 students. Individuals who did not complete both parts of the study were eliminated from all portions of the analysis.

Analysis

Reversed items were recoded. Scale values calculated and reliabilities estimated using coefficient alpha. Table 1 reports alpha, time 1 and time 2 means and standard deviations as well as time 1-time 2 correlations. Each scale produced acceptable reliability. Trait measures of emotion and the PRCA were all highly correlated from time 1 to time 2.

Initial equivalence of groups

It was important to determine that the speech groups were all similar initially and that they were not different in any major way from the control group. Chi-square revealed no significant initial differences among the experimental groups or between them and the control group on demographic variables. T-tests indicated that there were no significant differences among the experimental groups or between them and the control group on trait pleasure, dominance, arousal or PRCA scores. Analysis of covariance with speech anxiety as the dependent and each of the trait measures as covariates indicated no significant difference in anxiety among the groups or between them and the control group. The only covariate that was significant was the PRCA ($F = 45.99$, $df = 1, 71$, $p = <.001$).

TABLE 1

MEANS, RELIABILITIES AND CORRELATIONS FOR TIME 1 AND TIME 2

Scale	Alpha	N of Items	Correlation Time 1-Time 2	X1	S.D.1	X2	S.D.2
PRCA	.76	25	.79	67.88a	16.10	63.44b	13.13
Trait Pleasure	.91	6	.65	6.63a	1.38	6.71a	1.16
Trait Arousal	.58	6	.46	5.79a	1.07	5.65a	1.01
Trait Dominance	.82	6	.65	6.19a	1.23	6.28a	1.17
State Pleasure	.92	6	.50	5.90a	1.20	5.89a	1.23
State Arousal	.80	6	.47	6.73a	.80	6.31b	.94
State Dominance	.83	6	.48	5.87a	1.18	6.11b	1.10
Anxiety	.95	3	.28	6.35a	1.49	5.40b	1.62

Means for trait pleasure, arousal, dominance and the PRCA are for all 72 subjects. Means for state pleasure, arousal, dominance and anxiety are for the 61 subjects in the speech condition. Means with different subscripts are significantly different at the .05 level. All correlations are significant at the .05 level.

Results

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one suggested that the anxiety level of those who had successfully completed a public speaking course would be significantly reduced. To test this idea an analysis of covariance was conducted comparing the public speaking students with the small group communication class. Trait pleasure, arousal, dominance and the PRCA were used as covariates. Anxiety was significantly ($F = 4.88$, $df = 1, 72$, $p = <.05$) lower for the public speaking classes. The PRCA was again the only significant covariate ( ). Hypothesis one is supported.

Hypothesis two suggested that the change in anxiety levels felt by students in the public speaking class would be accompanied by increased feelings of pleasure and dominance and decreased feelings of arousal when confronted with a potential oral communication situation. These ideas were tested using paired t-tests of time 1 and time 2 means for state pleasure, arousal and dominance. State pleasure remained unchanged while arousal was significantly lower ($t = 1.90$, $df = 60$, $p = <.005$) and dominance was significantly higher ($t = -1.90$, $df = 60$, $p = <.05$). Hypothesis two was partially supported.

It was reasoned that the changes in the anxiety and emotion scores for the speech students might have been the result of maturation or changes in the environment that would have also affected the control group. To determine if the control group had also changed, their time 1 and time 2 scores were compared. Paired t-tests indicated that none of the measures were significantly different.

Discussion

Support of the first hypothesis documents what many speech teachers have contended for years. Training in the preparation of and practice delivering speeches reduces the anxiety felt by speakers. This result should be interpreted within the context of an average group of persons. The subjects in this study were not like those who would be in an intensive intervention program designed for the highly apprehensive individual. It is not clear if a basic course would have the same result with highly anxious persons.

It possible to suggest that those who are highly apprehensive about public speaking would be unable to complete such a course because of extreme anxiety. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that these people will avoid such courses and drop out when enrolled. Since the data were available we decided to compare those persons who did not complete the second half of this study with those who did. We found that the drop outs had significantly higher trait pleasure ($t = 3.16$, $p = <.01$) higher trait arousal ($t = 3.85$, $p = <.01$) and higher trait dominance ($t = 2.93$, $p = <.01$) than those who completed the course. Those who were not in the final pool also had higher initial arousal ($t = 2.95$, $p = <.01$) and dominance ($t = 2.26$, $p = <.05$) about delivering public speeches. There was no difference in the PRCA, or speech anxiety or pleasure felt when thinking about a speech. These results do not seem to suggest that, in this sample, there is any pattern of findings to support the notion that those who drop such a course are more speech anxious. Indeed, the pattern of emotions reported for these drop outs suggests that they might have had even greater reduction of anxiety if they had completed the course.

Support of the second hypothesis, while only partial, suggests that the change in anxiety that is reported by speech students is related to a changes in state emotional response. The trait emotions of our subjects remained

stable over time. This is encouraging but should not be surprising if these are truly traits. These findings would lend support to the notion that traits are predispositions but that cognitive change can intervene between them and state reactions. This supports the independence of the trait and state concepts. Three of the findings are of note. First, we notice that the amount of pleasure felt about public speaking is not changed as a result of the course. Many researchers (Mehrabian, 1980; Biggers and Masterson, 1984; Russell, 1980) have suggested that the pleasure dimension is the most important when predicting behavior. Here we find that the pleasure felt about a public speaking situation is very near the neutral point (five) on these scales. There is no increase in the pleasure reaction that a person feels as a result of speech training. Pleasure or displeasure about a speech situation is probably more a function of the specific characteristics of that situation rather than a global reaction to all speech situations.

Second, is the finding that the amount of arousal felt is reduced as a part of speech training. The anxiety reaction is one that is characterized as high in arousal. A reduction in arousal should produce a corresponding reduction in anxiety. Students seem to feel less stimulation after speech training. Arousal is still above the mid-point for the scale.

Third, we observe that individuals feel more dominance when confronted with a public speech situation after they have completed the public speech course. Again, higher feelings of mastery and control are usually associated with lower anxiety. The lower arousal and higher dominance may be the result of more familiarity with speech situations and therefore less uncertainty. Lowered uncertainty would increase feelings of control and reduce the need for alertness which contributes to arousal.

It seems reasonable to conclude that training in public speech significantly reduces the anxiety that a potential speaker will feel. This reduction in anxiety is not a function of increased pleasure about the speech situation but of an increased feeling of mastery and decreased feelings of stimulation.

Finally, the typical course in public speaking does seem to reduce anxiety about speaking while most of the persons traits remain stable. Surprisingly, one of those traits, Communication Apprehension, as measured with the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, does not remain stable. With the overall sample there is a significant difference ($t = 3.79$, $p = <.001$) between the first and the second administration of the instrument. There is no difference between the first and second measures of communication apprehension with the Small Group Communication Class. However, with the speech group there is a significant difference of more than five scale points ($t = 3.87$, $p = <.001$). This would seem to suggest that he PRCA is less stable than the trait Emotion Measures.

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